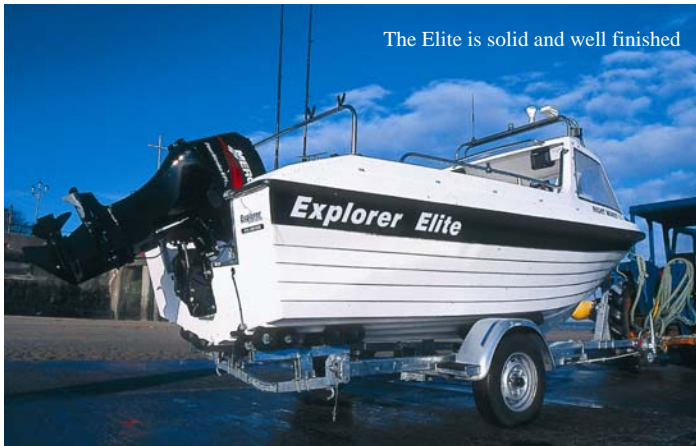


Boat Test - Explorer Elite

Chief TSF boat tester Mike Thrussell reckons he's found the perfect 16-footer. In fact he couldn't find a bad word to say about it!



I met Brian Atherton at his shop on the promenade at New Brighton, Merseyside. He runs Safe Water Training Sea School, a Royal Yachting Association-recognised teaching establishment that handles RYA boat courses, VHF, navigation and safety courses, plus lots more. He's also stacked up well over 30 years of fishing, both from shore and small boats. Quite a handy background to have if you decide to design and build small boats aimed at the angling market.



The Elite is solid and well finished

Quality

His design is the Explorer Elite, a neat 16ft 5in medium V-hull with a generous beam of 6ft 9in. He wanted the wide beam to give added stability, but also the space to make an easy-to-work-from deck area that is so necessary for angling. He also realised that different anglers wanted different things, and as a result he now offers two different stages of part-built hulls for home completion, and no less than five different engine packages. The list of extras is sensibly minimal but practical, covering everything you are likely to need. Something else to note is that the mouldings are all hand-laid, using only Lloyd's approved quality materials.

The Once Over

The boat I'd be testing was parked outside the shop. She's Brian's own boat, and aptly named 'Right Money II' as he insists that angling boats need to be good value, especially for first time buyers. While she was dry parked I took the opportunity to give her the once over. The transom is high above the splash well for both safety and to minimise any chance of water access. There is a T-cleat at each stern quarter, and a rod holder positioned in line with the transom. Brian has designed a half, square-shaped stainless steel rail to fit inside the rod holders for added safety when under way, and also to act as a rod rail if you decide to fit Breakaway V-type rod holders to it. The rail simply lifts out when required. The upper gunnels carry a complete full-length four-inch high stainless steel grab rail. This flares upwards to follow the lift line of the cabin and looks really smart. Up the bow you have a bow roller backed up with a no nonsense pedestal-type T-cleat for anchoring. The anchor well hatch is split into two doors folding upwards right and left to give better access. There's loads of room in the anchor well for the anchor, plus stacks of rope if you're into deep water wrecking. The bow also carries two separate flared bow rails.

(Continued on page 2)



There's plenty of room in the anchor well



A compact helm makes the handling easier

Cabin Fever

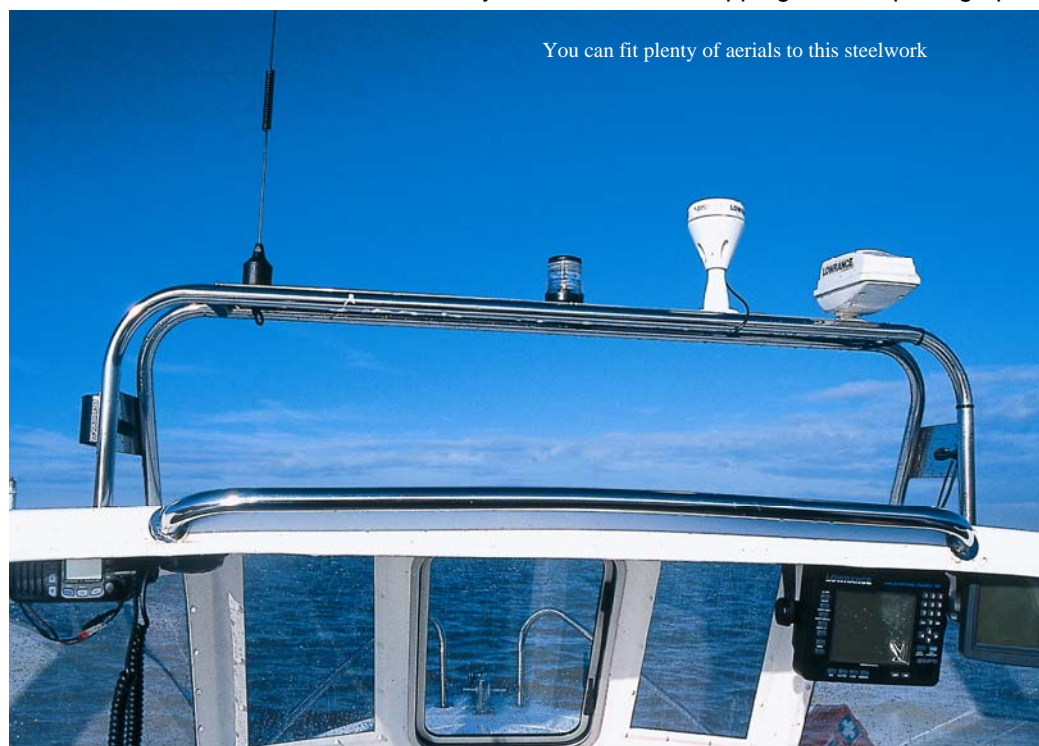
The windscreen is split into three separate screens, the middle being a Houdini type hatch, giving access for anchor retrieval from the safety of inside the cabin. There's a large single window down each side of the cabin too, held in place by stainless steel bolts for security. The top of the cabin has ample room for a stainless steel gantry to take aerials, GPS and radar reflector. The helm seat is positioned on the starboard side with a neat column console, the top of which has enough room to house GPS screen and compass. The fuse/switch box is also on the right side of the console, with the engine instruments in front of you. You also have hatch access to the inside of the locker from both deck and inner cabin sides. There was also a pedestal-type helm seat fitted on the test boat. A stainless steel-framed helmsman wheel is used. This gives excellent grip if your hands are cold and wet because it has a hard matt material covering the outer frame.

On Deck

The deck area has a non-slip stippled covering and is finished in battleship grey to minimise light flare coming up off the deck to blind you. It's constructed through a fibreglass stringer system giving a fully stiff, non-giving deck area to work from. The fuel tank sits in the drain well at the back, and the well can take two Mariner tanks. The transom is recessed with an open battery compartment situated on the port side rear. On the test boat the starboard side was left open, but you can have another battery compartment here if required - in case, like me, you prefer separate batteries for engine and electrics. The insides of the gunnels carry two rod-holder trees. You can also use these to store boat hooks and landing nets. The gunnels are waist height and give a feeling of true security when you're standing on deck. The cabin is a fully walk-in type. It has seat bunks on either side with small storage lockers fitted with lift up hatch access. There is ample seating for four people in here. The cabin roof area can also be used to mount additional electrical equipment like radios and sounders.

Moving On To Mersey

We launched on sand in front of the promenade just after low tide. Because she was housed on an all roller trailer she slid off easily with just a gentle push. 'Right Money II' was matched to a Mercury 4-Stroke EFI 60HP motor with Power Trim and Tilt. Dead quiet on tick over, but burbling with power. We headed out slowly into a mud-coloured Mersey Estuary with the wind generators towards Bootle dominating the skyline. The Mersey was pretty flat, but there was a steady northeast wind whipping across, putting up some chop. While under way



You can fit plenty of aerials to this steelwork

with Brian at the wheel, I wandered around the deck checking out stability. With two of us on the starboard side, and me leaning right over the boat, thanks to that generous beam, she dips a fraction at the gunnel then stops dead - ideal if two of you need to grab a big tope or cod at the gunnel and lift it aboard for unhooking or tagging. Someone wandering around on deck while the boat is moving doesn't affect the steering line either. Some small boat designs can suffer steering deviation when people move about.



The open cabin design is proving very popular

All Aboard

I jumped aboard an accompanying RIB to get some moving shots. This also gave me a chance to observe the test boat at speed to assess wake. The boat disturbs very little water and leaves a flat clean wake at speed. This gives a good indication of overall stability and her capability of achieving speed performance easily. I also noticed as she passed by that there was very little water chatter. Some hulls I've tested make a lot of noise in the water as they pass you by at close range. This is a quiet boat that skips along efficiently, even at full speed. Back aboard, it was my turn at the wheel. Pushing the throttle forward there is no pause for the power to come in. The nose lifts a little and surges forward, reaching full plane almost immediately. Throttling back a tad to cruising speed the hull settles down to a steady pace, and again you realise how quiet the boat is in the water, even with the wind whipping past your face. I prefer to stand when steering and found visibility at speed excellent. The hull cuts through water cleanly with no pounding through the hull as you attack the waves. We were using the RIB to create some rougher water and forcing the medium V-hull to slice through tight, short waves. Even close to flat out we were cutting water with little effort.

Over The Top

I was banking the boat over in ridiculously tight short circles, trying to get the stern to slide, but the hull has excellent grip and proved predictable during these manoeuvres. I only had the waves created by the RIB to back the boat into, but with the way the boat behaved and her attitude in reverse, I could see no problems handling her in a rough following sea. I questioned Brian about this and he's



Deep V-hulls are very popular-worldwide

had the boat out in bad following seas during both testing and fishing. He has found her predictable with little if any water getting over the top of the splash well. Medium Vs are proven hulls pretty much worldwide. They are excellent workers even into heavy, head-on seas. This hull behaves the same and is pretty dry, forcing spray out at the sides at an angle with little finding its way back on deck. Much like my own boat, you'll get the very best from the Elite by careful positioning of your equipment to balance out the boat and get her trimmed properly. Watch experienced crews packing their boats and you'll see that everything has its

place. It's not just a case of neatness, they'll be stowing gear with the boat's overall balance at speed in mind.

Performance

What about the all-important performance figures then? Well, with the 50hp Mariner strapped to the transom, expect cruising speeds of around 24 knots depending on the amount of gear and people you're carrying. A 5-gallon fuel tank will give you a good 45 miles range or more at this speed. The big 60hp Mariner package gives a cruising speed of 24 to 25 knots, but a top speed of 33 knots. You'll get around 40 miles per fuel tank skipping along at about 24 knots cruising speed. The Mariner 50hp ELPTO produces a top speed of 27 knots and cruises nicely around 22 to 24 knots. Cruising fuel consumption equates to about 47 miles per tank.

What Impressed Me Most

I really liked the no clutter design of the Elite. The deck space is fully open, which makes for easy working and handling of both equipment and fish. Equally important to me was the full access into the forward cabin area. Simply duck your head a little and walk in. I also liked the ease of access and body stability when standing through the Houdini hatch to retrieve the anchor. Many boats don't achieve this. As a fishing platform she is totally stable, even when your mate is moving around. You also have to be impressed with the overall finish of the boat. Most of the fittings are stainless steel, you're hard pressed to find any blemishes on the fibreglass and everything is bonded together properly. I'm trying to find fault somewhere, but I'm genuinely struggling. The Elite offers sound hull performance and sea keeping characteristics with an easy temperament, making it an ideal buy for a first time boat owner. Equally so, if you need to trail a boat all the time, want easy launching, the ability to travel quickly and cheaply, then the layout of the boat will get the seasoned boat angler scratching his head looking for ways to improve the design. It's a tough call!



Facts And Figures

Design category: C Length: 16ft 5in Beam: 6ft 9in Draught: 10ins

Unladen weight: 440kg Maximum load: 588kg Maximum persons: Four

Packages

There are several package options available with Explorer, but as a guide the basic Elite with a Mariner 50 ELPTO engine and Roller Coaster Braked Trailer retails from £8,719.00 and a basic Elite armed with a Mariner 60 ELPT/4-stroke/EFI engine has a price from £10,419.00.

Explorer Boats also have available finance packages subject to status. Have a word with them and they'll do their best to get you afloat.

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